

Connecting with our Religion through Pattacchitra Art

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Abstract

“Art is the stored honey of the human soul.” – Theodore Dreiser

Where the boundaries of rationale start tapering, the contours of creativity can still be seen building castles. The growth of society and humanity can be attributed as much to the creativity of humans as to their brain power.

India is a land of diverse art forms with many traditional and folk art forms still being practiced, cherished, and decorated on the walls. Each art form is unique and distinct from the other, thereby capturing the essence of the region beautifully. One such traditional art form from the South-Eastern part of the country is the **Pattachitra Art**. This art form is believed to have originated as early as the 12th century and is one of the oldest and most famous living art forms.

Keywords

Pattachitra, Raghurajpur, Folk art, Chitrakars, Patua, Chalchitra, Bhatti Chitra, Pothi Chitra

Introduction

Pattachitra style of painting is a cloth-based scroll painting and is one of the oldest and most popular art forms with roots in Odisha and West Bengal.

Etymologically, Pattachitra is derived from two Sanskrit words – *paṭṭa* meaning "cloth" and *chitra* meaning "picture".

Pattachitra is a disciplined form of art and comes with a set of rules and restrictions around themes, color schemes etc. Odisha Pattachitra is somewhat different from the Bengal

Pattachitra, especially in its theme. The Odisha Pattachitra is centered around the theme of Gods and is closely tied with the spiritual and cultural facets of temple traditions in Odisha. On the other hand, the Bengal Pattachitra, though deriving its inspiration from religious texts, uses the paintings for storytelling of mythological and folklore tales.

Odisha Pattachitra

Theme

These paintings are based on Hindu mythology and are specifically inspired by the Jagannath and Vaishnava sect. The old temple murals in Puri, Konark, and Bhubaneswar signify that Pattachitra paintings were an artistic form in the early centuries. The most popular themes are The Badhia (a depiction of the temple of Jagannath), Krishna Lila (an enactment of Jagannath as Lord Krishna), Dasabatara Patti (the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu), and Panchamukhi (a depiction of Lord Ganesh as a five-headed deity). Yamapati and yatripatas include paintings of the Puri temple, while Saiva, Ragachitras, Shakta, and Navagunjar focus on the avatars of Lord Krishna.



Image 1: Pattachitra showing Jagannath Yatra Procession

Types

There are three types of Odisha Pattachitra paintings on the basis of the type of base used, though their style is largely the same. These are:

- **Pattachitra:** The cloth-based paintings are called **Pattachitra**.
- **Bhitti Chitra:** The paintings done on walls are known as '**Bhitti Chitra**.'
- **Tala Patra Chitra'** or '**Pothi Chitra:** The paintings done on palm leaves are called '**Tala Patra Chitra'** or '**Pothi Chitra**.' Here the palm leaves are sewn together to form the base or canvas for the painting. The picture is sketched using white or black ink and the palm leaves are held together in a way, such that they can be folded or unfolded.

Technique

Traditionally, the Pattachitra artists were known as 'chitrakars'. The entire painting is handmade, beginning from the process of making the canvas. The artists prepare the canvas or the "patta" by coating the cloth with a mixture of chalk and glue (made out of tamarind seeds). This mixture is then rubbed into the cloth using two different stones. Finally, the cloth is dried.

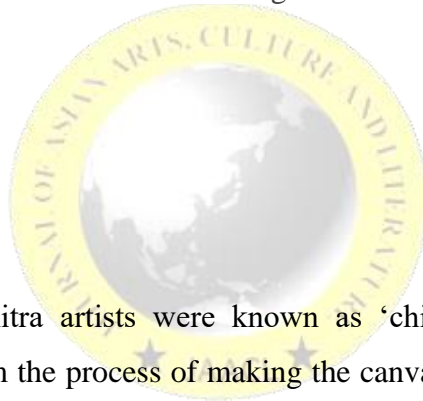




Image 2: Mixing of chalk with glue



Image 3: Application of paste on cloth

Once dried, the leathery finish of the cloth or patta indicates that it is now ready for the artist to be worked upon. The chitrakars do not draw a sketch but directly use paint to draw the outline of the artwork. The colors are then filled, and the final image is given a lacquer coating to withstand the weather, and add a slight sheen to the painting. In fact, the painting is held on top of a fire, such that the painting's back is exposed to the heat while lacquer is applied on the other side of the painting.

It is interesting that the artists who create the Pattachitra work as a family where the men or the primary artist creates the outline of the painting on small strips of cotton cloth whereas

the women work on preparing the glue, the canvas, and sometimes, even filling the paintings with colours.

The traditional Pattachitra are painted in natural colors - Hingula, Haritala, Kala, Sankha and Geru i.e. red, yellow, black, white, green, and indigo. The painters use vegetable and mineral colours instead of using artificial ones and mix them in dried coconut shells. Black color is derived from the lamp soot, white from the paste of conch shells, yellow comes from the Hartal stone, and orange from the Gerua stone. Leaves of the Hyacinth plant are powdered to make green, whereas red comes from the Hingula rock and Indigo is prepared from Ramaraja. This only reflects the amount of effort and love that goes into creating this glorified piece of art.



Image 4: Pattachitra portraying Krishna Leela

The brushes that are used by these '*chitrakar*s' are also indigenous and made of hair of domestic animals. A bunch of hair tied to the end of a bamboo stick make the brush.



Image 5: Pattachitra portraying Dashavatar, and Krishna's life journey since birth

The dress style has Mughal influences. The lines are bold, clean, angular and sharp. A floral border created using natural colors is a must, giving it a unique look and feel that is typical to Pattachitra and cannot be replicated.

The Art Village of Raghurajpur

Situated about 14 km away from the Hindu pilgrimage town of Puri, Odisha, on the southern banks of river Bhargabi, is the heritage crafts village of Raghurajpur. It is also the birthplace of Shilp Guru Dr. Jagannath Mahapatra, who is a prominent Pattachitra artist and has made a huge contribution to the development of Pattachitra art and Raghurajpur.

The village of Raghurajpur has more than 100 chitrakara families, living in houses decorated with mural paintings. It is the only village in India where practically every household is

involved in an artistic pursuit though in recent times, they have diversified their skill to create palm leaf paintings, carvings on coconut shells, Tussar painting and more.



Image 6: A house in Raghurajpur

Around 2000, it was developed as a heritage village by INTACH, and soon became a major rural tourist destination of the state, drawing tourist, both domestic and foreign to the village. The artists heartily welcome the tourists and explain their entire process of creating the Pattachitra. It is truly a haven for an art enthusiast and one can spend days visiting houses of each of the artists which are filled with their ancestral art treasure.

It is also the venue of the annual *Basant Utsav – Parampara Raghurajpur* (Spring Festival).

Bengal Pattachitra

The Bengal Pattachitra is similar to the Odisha Pattachitra in style and technique but varies in theme. Bengal Pattachitra paintings, being socio-cultural in nature, are based on society, traditions, folklore, religious or mythological stories with a song associated to each artwork. The artist, known as a Patua, sings a song while unfolding the painting. These songs became a means to bring forth public issues, such as current news, folklore, family planning, dowry system etc. Patua Sangeet or Pater Gan is a cultural tradition of singing Bengal Pattachitra.



Image 7: A Patua singing a folklore while exhibiting Pattachitra

The other types of Bengal Pattachitra, such as Chalchitra create the idol of Durga as a background. Similarly, Durga Pot or Durga Sara is the worshipped Pattachitra. Durga Pot has a hemispherical Pattachitra where chitra of Durga is in the middle position.

The Bengal Pattachitra also varies because of the subtle differences in color or design from region to region.

Conclusion

Pattachitra artform is a traditional art form that combines religious aspects of certain regions with creativity and is known for its intricate details as well as mythological narratives and folktales inscribed in it. Done on handmade canvas, it embodies rich colors, creative motifs, and designs, and portrayal of mythological themes.

This artform is a visual treat, and a way to connect with our past, culture, and tradition.

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Vandana Bhasin is a banker turned writer and artist based out of Gurugram. She is a published author and recipient of numerous prestigious awards for her literary contributions including ALS Wordsmith Award for three consecutive years. Her works are published in more than two dozen anthologies. Her debut book "Roads" was awarded "Best Debut Poetry Book" by ALS in Feb 2021. A bilingual writer, she enjoys writing poetry, short stories and articles.

Vandana runs her art studio in the name of "Verses & Hues Art Studio" in the heart of Gurugram. She is the Editor of ALSphere Magazine since March, 2022. Her writings and artworks are available at her website www.versesandhues.art.

